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ABSTRACT

Although educational reform approaches have varied from state to state, most efforts have shared some common elements: (1) concentration of educational policymaking in state capitols by state-level officials; (2) a widespread conviction that schools of education, local school officials, and teachers are unwilling or unable to "reform" themselves; and (3) duplication of managerial practices used in the private sector. This paper discusses three traditional kinds of reforms (minimum standards, merit pay, and career ladders) sharing the three common elements, outlines some basic dilemmas confronting school administrators, and presents a new perspective on school system management. Stiffer minimum standards for teachers may be needed, but such an approach reinforces the notion that reform must be imposed from outside. Merit pay and career ladders, meant to encourage self-improvement, merely reinforce hierarchical educational structures most in need of change. Administrators often resort to top-down controls to reform their systems. Teachers are allowed a fair amount of discretion not by design, but by default. Trying to bribe or coerce teachers is self-defeating, since they will further insulate their classrooms from outside interference. Resolving the discretion/coordination dilemma demands a new perspective (adopted by effective schools) that maximizes program coordination and increases teacher discretion simultaneously. Effective school districts are tapping the wealth of expertise, information, and eagerness to improve lying trapped and underutilized in isolated classrooms across the United States. (MLH)

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A summary of research findings
on approaches to educational reform
and the management of school systems

EA 019 286

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Ever since the President's Commission on Excellence in Education issued its report, A Nation At Risk, in 1983, state legislatures and local school districts have considered a wide variety of educational reforms. Progress toward implementing these various initiatives has been uneven. The acrimony they have generated in many states has been interpreted, by some, as confirmation that the Educational Establishment cannot be trusted to reform itself, and by others, as the natural consequence of approaches that define school boards, administrators, teachers and their unions as causes of problems and targets of blame.

These circular arguments do little to clarify whether the particular kinds of changes being debated and rejected or implemented are, in fact, appropriate vehicles for improving the quality of public education. What follows on the next few pages are brief summaries of research that addresses that question.

The research was conducted by members of Organizational Analysis and Practice, a research and consulting group that specializes in the practical application of organizational science. OAP's clients include employers, labor organizations and labor-management committees in the private and public sectors. In public education, it has worked with state-level task forces, school districts and teachers organizations on issues concerning the organization and management of school districts, the structure of teaching as a profession and the nature of teaching itself.

A handful of conclusions and themes serves to integrate OAP's various research findings. We are convinced that those conclusions and themes provide a valuable perspective from which to analyze traditional approaches to educational reform. What is more important, they provide the basis for formulating new and more effective approaches that can win the support of school boards, administrators, teachers and their representatives.

Samuel B. Bacharach,
President

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Director, Educational
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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

Although specific approaches to educational reform have varied from state to state, most efforts have shared several common elements:

- Most reforms have been initiated by state governors and state-level task forces and have taken the form of prescriptive state legislation and regulations issued by state-level officials. In fact, the most far-reaching effect of the current reform movement may well be the concentration of educational policy-making in state capitals.

- Concentration of activity at the state level can be attributed to many factors, but one of the most significant has been the widespread conviction that schools of education, local school officials and their teachers are unwilling and/or unable to "reform themselves".

- Many of these reforms, and particularly those affecting school district personnel policies, have been characterized as efforts to duplicate managerial practices that are widely-used and well-accepted in the private sector.

On the next several pages, we discuss three kinds of reform initiatives that share these features in common. The first set of initiatives address minimum standards for entering and remaining in the teaching profession; the other two address the structure of teaching and the way in which teachers are paid for their efforts.

Minimum Standards for Entering Teaching

One of the most obvious ways in which state governments might try to raise educational standards is to change the standards for entry into the profession. Those initiatives that take this approach invariably employ minimum standards, designed to keep persons who fail to meet them from entering or remaining in teaching.

Clearly, any profession or occupation must have some such set of standards, if only because someone, somehow must make decisions about who will receive employment. But there are weaknesses inherent in any reform strategy that relies primarily or exclusively on minimum standards.

One weakness is that such standards can be readily side-stepped or lowered, whenever there are problems finding persons to bring into the profession. School districts made heavy use of emergency certificates and out-of-field assignments in the years immediately following the Second World War, when the nation's school districts were faced with serious staff shortages, and there is no reason to believe they will not do so again, now that another shortage is in the offing. Indeed, they have already begun to make heavy use of such "exceptional" procedures to fill vacancies in mathematics and science positions.

Even under the most favorable conditions, however, minimum standards necessarily focus on the least that can or will be expected from someone proceeding through the system. Appeals to "realism" inevitably dillute the reformer's zeal to raise standards. What begins as an effort to improve the profession winds up with an assurance that "most" people needn't worry because standards won't be set "too" high.

In good times and bad, minimum standards represent threats to the interests of the individuals to whom they apply; under some circumstances, they also represent threats to the interests of the gatekeepers who must administer them. It is hardly surprising, then, that reformers whose strategies rely exclusively or primarily on minimum standards would be quick to cite the conventional wisdom about not trusting foxes to guard the hen house. Minimum standards dictate that sort of hen house logic; they require a measure of outside imposition.

Two other kinds of reform initiatives purport to overcome the weaknesses of changes that require outside imposition and monitoring, by building incentives for improvement into the basic structure of teachers' pay systems. One set of initiatives is generally labelled "merit pay", the other "career ladders".

Merit Pay

One of the most popular and controversial educational reforms is "merit pay", which allocates special payments or pay increments to teachers based on some form of evaluation of their performance. Such pay systems are said to give school districts special incentives to strengthen their evaluation and training procedures, and to give teachers special incentives to pay attention to

evaluative feedback and to seek help from each other in improving their performance.

Yet dissatisfaction with evaluation procedures, friction between administrators and teachers, and friction among teachers themselves are the three reasons why districts typically abandon such plans soon after they implement them.

Merit evaluation procedures are most-often criticized for their lack of objectivity, but that criticism is misleading. The pursuit of ever-more objective evaluation criteria -- and standards for drawing objective distinctions between different levels of merit on any given criterion -- is absolutely necessary when the allocation of pay raises hangs in the balance. But pursuing those objectives merely reinforces the weaknesses in already-weak teacher evaluation procedures, by diverting the attention of evaluators from those aspects of teaching that are most difficult to master and least subject to objective assessment.

Even if accusations of subjectivity and bias could be overcome, merit pay systems can cripple the open communication needed for constructive discussion of aspects of performance that might need improvement. Teachers can hardly be expected to volunteer potentially adverse information about their own performance to evaluators who have control over pay raises.

Merit pay also dicourages cooperation and sharing of job knowledge among teachers, by forcing them to compete with each other for a fixed pot of money. Given the nature of school district financing, there must be some quota or limit on the number or size of merit increments available. Unlike employees in sales and certain entrepreneurial occupations -- where merit pay systems often do work effectively -- individual teachers have no opportunity to "finance" their own merit increments by generating new money for their employer.

By weakening evaluation systems, discouraging communication between teachers and administrators and further isolating teachers from each other, merit pay reinforces what are already three of the most serious weaknesses of our public school systems.

Career Ladders

Another set of reforms that have been widely-considered are so-called "career ladder" or "master teacher" plans.

Such plans typically create hierarchies among teachers and provide for promotion from one level to the next. Most plans provide for some reduction in the amount of classroom teaching a person performs as he or she advances up a ladder, as he or she assumes responsibility for new functions, such as course development, program evaluation, teacher training or service as "mentor" for beginning teachers.

Teachers often find the career ladder concept attractive. The flat job structures of most school districts provide few opportunities for teachers to have a sense of career advancement or professional growth, and what opportunities they do provide involve leaving the classroom and entering administration. Career ladder plans allow teachers to assume more responsibility for schoolwide programs, without having to leave teaching altogether.

But there is nothing inherent in the existing compensation or job structures of public education that prevents districts from involving teachers in decision-making or providing them with more developmental support. Specifying that a teacher must receive a promotion before he or she is eligible to perform new and different kinds of responsibilities merely limits the number of teachers who can perform them, creating a structural obstacle where none presently exists.

Specifying that particular duties belong to teachers at particular levels of the system virtually guarantees that advancement will be limited by quotas on the number of positions at each level, by turnover among people already in those positions, and by competition with others seeking such positions. Indeed, several states specify explicit quotas in their career ladder legislation, undermining their claim that career advancement will depend solely or even primarily on a person's individual qualifications.

Although intended to raise the status of teaching, such plans merely reinforce the conviction that classroom teaching itself is a less than "fully professional" activity. Those at higher steps of the job hierarchy may continue to perform some classroom teaching, but it is still their other duties that justify their higher status and pay.

All of these criticisms turn on one feature of career ladder proposals that is largely taken for granted, namely, the assumption that a system of career advancement necessarily requires that there be some formal connection

between different sets of duties and different career levels. It is not surprising that many people would equate career advancement with climbing what is, in effect, a job ladder. Promotion from one job to the next is a typical, if not the typical, form of career advancement in most occupational settings. Yet we know that there are occupations where hierarchical career structures operate without strict delineation of what duties "belong" to each level (e.g., assistant, associate and full professor in higher education; apprentice, journeyman and master status in many craft occupations).

The assumption that there has to be a formal link between career levels and job responsibilities represents the fundamental reason teachers and their unions have opposed the enactment of most career ladder legislation. When OAP consultants have pointed out that a career ladder need not make such a linkage, they have found teachers and their representatives in several different states receptive to career ladder proposals; in fact, we have found them eager to take the lead in developing such proposals and pressing for their enactment.

General Summary

There are strong reasons for believing that many of the changes currently being considered by state legislatures are not appropriate ways of effecting fundamental reform in our public school systems. Stiffer minimum standards for entering the profession may, indeed, be necessary, but reform proposals that rely exclusively on minimum standards merely reinforce the notion that "reform" is something that outsiders must impose on teachers and school systems. By themselves, they undermine the incentive for teachers, administrators and school boards to assume responsibility for improvement themselves. On the other hand, the two most frequently discussed reforms that are ostensibly meant to provide such incentives -- merit pay and so-called "career ladders" -- merely reinforce precisely those elements of our educational system that are in most need of change.

Rather than basing their recommendations on documented evidence that their strategies will, in fact, remedy the problems they intend to address, most reformers have justified their proposals on the grounds that the same (or similar) strategies "work" in the private sector and can therefore be expected to "work" in public education as well. In the next section, we argue that private sector experience does, indeed, provide useful lessons that might guide school reformers, but the lessons that

ought to be drawn from private sector experience are not necessarily the ones that educational reformers typically draw.

BASIC DILEMMAS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS

It isn't perversity that leads state officials to equate "reform" with the imposition of new and more effective top-down controls. Although school boards, central administrators and school principals sometimes complain about such "outside interference", they often resort to control strategies themselves when they conclude that some special new effort is needed to improve the performance of their school district or school. Their tendency to do so reflects a concern for the coordination of educational systems that often seem to defy coordination.

Schools are not like some organizations, where one person provides one product or service to one particular customer or client at one point in time. No one teacher has complete responsibility for providing services to a school system's immediate clients, and those immediate clients are not the only constituency a school system serves.

Students acquire "an education" over twelve or thirteen years of their lifetimes, as they move from classroom to classroom, grade to grade, and building to building. What they receive represents a service to them but also represents a service (or rather, a set of services) to families, employers and communities, each with their own needs and ways of making them known.

If there isn't some coherence and consistency to a school system's educational program -- if the efforts of individual teachers and other members of a school system aren't effectively coordinated -- enormous amounts of resources will be wasted, enormous amounts of confusion will be generated, and the likelihood that the system can meet the needs of any of its many constituencies are relatively slim.

Yet school districts are not structured to facilitate coordination. Each teacher generally has responsibility for a particular group or several groups of students for an extended period of time, and is usually responsible for planning, executing and evaluating the results of his or her instruction on his or her own. The physical structures, staffing patterns and time schedules of most school systems make it virtually impossible for building principals to provide close supervision of individual teachers, and the same features prevent teachers from

communicating and coordinating their activities with each other.

It is understandable and appropriate, therefore, that efforts to reform public school systems should be designed to provide closer coordination of teachers' separate activities. Schools should not -- but too often do -- resemble collections of autonomous professionals, each free to do whatever he or she may happen to think is in the best interests of his or her students.

It is understandable but inappropriate, however, for reformers to assume that coordination can only be achieved by the imposition of further controls and restrictions on the day-to-day activities of teachers. In fact, the same conditions that make it difficult to achieve coordination make it necessary for school systems to allow their teachers wide discretion over how they go about planning, executing and evaluating what they and their students do.

Research on teaching demonstrates that teachers need considerable discretion, not only over how they organize and perform their work, but also over what "work" they decide to perform. School systems need to allow teachers that discretion, because they are the only ones with direct and on-going contact with the organization's immediate clients, because those clients' needs and abilities vary widely and are constantly changing, and because strategies for addressing those needs and capitalizing on those abilities are usually not readily apparent.

Teaching involves the simultaneous pursuit of a variety of objectives. Teachers are responsible for addressing the needs and problems of individual students, but most of their work with individuals occurs while class is in session, when they are also responsible for instructing and orchestrating the activities of whole classes and groups of students. The relationships between teachers and students are those of counselor to client, manager to subordinate, craftsperson to "material" and actor to audience. Few, if any, occupations require employees to combine so many different roles and to perform all of them simultaneously.

Teachers themselves are generally responsible for deciding how to manage and coordinate those different roles. That general responsibility is itself the most difficult and demanding aspect of teaching, and is the responsibility most likely to contribute to (or detract from) teaching effectiveness. To perform that responsibility effectively, teachers must be prepared to exercise

discretion and judgment in ambiguous situations where "cookbook" solutions are rarely available.

School systems, therefore, are not like some organizations that have a single, readily-defined "product". Unlike many organizations, they cannot specify standard procedures for producing their products, they cannot anticipate major production problems and specify procedures for dealing with them, and they can rarely be certain what resources will be needed at each step of the production process.

Organizations that enjoy those advantages can and do limit the discretion of their workers to a considerable extent. The clear lines of authority, delegations of responsiblity, procedural rules and centralized evaluation, planning and decision-making processes that limit discretion and guarantee coordination in such organizations are altogether logical, not because they represent management tools that are always appropriate, but because they represent tools that are appropriate given the products and technologies of those particular settings.

Service organizations that do not enjoy that degree of predictability must rely upon individual employees to make many, if not most, of the important day-to-day decisions affecting their work. To be effective, they must encourage their employees to exercise initiative and judgment, and must provide an environment that encourages them to remain sensitive to the needs of their individual clients or customers, take risks and assume responsibility for finding ways of improving their own performance.

Most schools systems do allow their teachers a considerable amount of discretion, but they generally do so by lack of attention rather than by design. Comparisons between teaching and a variety of other occupations confirm that teachers are remarkably isolated (and insulated) from substantive contact with administrators and peers, particularly for an occupation requiring so much non-routine decision-making. The net result is that teachers in most school districts must develop critical decision-making and management skills largely on their own, through an uncertain, unguided process of trial-and-error.

Rather than encouraging teachers to take initiative and risks, the combination of relative isolation and the occasional imposition of top-down controls actually discourages teachers from doing anything that would attract "outside attention" to their classroom efforts. Efforts to prescribe "objective" evaluation criteria for

which teachers can be held accountable merely divert attention from those aspects of teaching that involve the exercise of discretion and judgment: those aspects that can benefit most from constructive criticism but are least subject to objective measurement.

Reform and improvement strategies that hinge on the assumption that teachers must be bribed or coerced or directed to improve are ultimately self-defeating. They merely reinforce the tendency they are designed to overcome -- the tendency for teachers to insulate their individual classrooms from outside interference -- thereby making coordination all the more difficult to achieve. What makes that tendency particularly troublesome is that it also discourages teachers from fully exercising the discretion they are (sometimes grudingly) allowed.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Debates over the reform of school systems invariably turn on the relationship between the issues of coordination and discretion. Whatever the immediate focus of attention, the underlying issue in every debate is always how school systems should be managed, given the apparent tension between those two fundamental needs.

The issue of educational reform is rarely stated in those terms, because those who initiate reform are apt to be at higher political or administrative levels, where the need for coordination is most apparent, and because they almost invariably equate coordination with limiting and controlling the discretion of those at lower levels of the system. Those at lower levels -- most especially, teachers -- are rarely involved in the process of formulating reform or "improvement" programs. Although sensitive to the demands of coordinating what goes on in their individual classrooms, they are most keenly aware of their own need for discretion, and frame their defense of that need in terms of autonomy from outside control.

Until recently, most observers who have styled themselves as "realists" have tended to assume that the course of educational reform would always follow such a pattern. Optimists would speak of school systems making incremental improvements in their programs; cynics and pessimists would make reference to merry-go-rounds. The possibility that school systems might achieve anything more than a set of watered-down compromises between two needs that are assumed to be inherently in conflict was dismissed out of hand. The possibility that school systems might be able to give their individual teachers more discretion while achieving closer coordination of their separate activities was never even entertained.

Recently, however, research on "school effectiveness" has begun to challenge that conventional wisdom. That research has produced evidence that schools that are demonstrably more effective than others (given similar student populations and levels of funding) are ones that have maximized the coordination of programs and increased the discretion of individual teachers. Although more descriptive than explanatory, that research provides several powerful clues as to how such schools have achieved those results:

- Their staff members have a common, coherent set of goals and objectives which they themselves have helped

formulate, reflecting high expectations of themselves and their students.

o Their principals exercise strong leadership by promoting a "norm of collegiality", minimizing status differences between themselves and their staff members, promoting informal communication and reducing their own need to use formal controls to achieve coordination.

o Principals and staff members place a high priority on staff development, personal initiative and continuous improvement of personal skills. They place heavy emphasis on formative evaluation, training, informal sharing of job-knowledge and promoting a "norm of continuous improvement" among all staff members.

o Principals and staff members make heavy use of a variety of formal and informal processes for monitoring progress toward goals, using them to identify obstacles to such progress and ways of overcoming them, rather than using them to make summary judgments regarding the "competence" of particular staff members.

With clearer agreement on ends, more teacher involvement in decision-making, and much heavier informal communication among staff members, the principals in such "effective schools" have been able to forego the use of formal controls on the means that their teachers use to achieve purposes that all staff members have agreed upon. Teachers in such schools are not only permitted but expected to assume more responsibility for coordinating their own activities with those of others. They have abandoned the notion that their need for discretion entitles them to act as independent agents in their individual classrooms.

An altogether different body of research, focusing on the effectiveness of private sector organizations, lends credibility to this interpretation of the school effectiveness literature. Academic scholarship, as well as such popular volumes like Peters and Waterman's In Search of Excellence, are generating a model of goal-oriented, participatory management remarkably consistent with the model that is beginning to emerge from studies of effective schools.

Private sector organizations that achieve "excellence" are ones that expect excellence and continuous improvement from all of their members, and have cultures, processes and leaders that constantly reinforce that expectation. The suggestion that they would ever tolerate (much

less endorse) a "quota on excellence" is inconsistent with everything we know about such organizations. The notion that they would intentionally structure pay relationships in a way that discourages cooperation and sharing of job knowledge among employees whose work efforts are interdependent is just as incongruous. Yet both of those suggestions are inherent in proposals that are characterized as "reforms" of public education, justified by allusions to "accepted practice" in private sector settings.

It is easier, in fact, to specify the kinds of strategies that "effective schools" and effective private sector organizations do not use than it is to specify those they do use. The strategies that organizations, in both sectors, might use to achieve closer coordination and promote individual initiative are only now becoming apparent. OAP's own research and consulting have emphasized the need to move beyond the largely descriptive studies that have been produced to date, and to draw on the experience of private sector organizations to formulate new approaches to school reform.

It would be a mistake, however, to expect that these recent developments in research and in private sector managerial practices will ever yield the kinds of specific, readily-transferable "cookbook solutions" that some educational reformers have found so attractive. The essential feature of truly effective organizations is that they have been able to draw upon their own employees' experience, knowledge of work processes and close contact with clients to generate their own specific solutions to problems and strategies for improvement.

Research on effective schools and on effective private sector organizations confirms that the detailed knowledge and insights which organizations need to resolve problems and meet challenges almost invariably lie within their organizations, with those who have direct access to clients or customers, who are directly responsible for doing the "work" of the organization and who therefore confront those problems and challenges on a day-to-day basis.

The real test of the current education reform movement will be whether outsiders can find strategies that do not depend upon the imposition of top-down controls, but rather, help school districts tap the wealth of expertise, information and eagerness to improve that presently lie trapped and underutilized in the isolated classrooms of our nation's schools.

A FINAL COMMENT ABOUT OAP

OAP's approach to consulting is based on the same perspective that we apply to issues of school reform. Our role is not to give school districts or teachers pre-packaged answers to problems or challenges, but to help them develop their own strategies for making practical and effective use of the resources they already possess. Our services are designed to help schools and other organizations develop the capacity to improve their own performance.

For further information on OAP's perspective on school improvement, and how we apply that perspective in our own consulting efforts, we invite interested parties to contact:

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